

Editorial: It's time for urgency on state budget

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With a potential shutdown of Washington government less than two weeks away, all is quiet on the budget front.

Gov. Jay Inslee has finally taken a more active role refereeing discussions between Senate Republicans and House Democrats, reportedly trying to remain a neutral messenger despite his Democratic allegiances. If there is a sense of urgency, it should be his.

Absent a budget to carry Washington into a fiscal year that starts July 1, state government will have to shut down nonessential services – parks, for example – just before the July 4 weekend.

Some contractors and vendors have already received notice their work for the state must cease June 30. State employees will begin to get their notices next week.

We've been here before. In 2013, Inslee signed the biennial budget on June 30, at the end of a 16-day, double-overtime legislative session. That \$33.6 billion package included what was considered a down payment on state progress toward meeting Washington Supreme Court demands that the state assume responsibility for amply funding basic education, and in the process reduce inequities between rich and poor school districts.

That effort did not satisfy the court, which in September found the Legislature in contempt of its ruling in the McCleary case. The justices held off on imposing any penalties while lawmakers worked toward a final solution that must be in place by 2018, a deadline they had imposed on themselves.

Despite projections state government will have an additional \$3 billion in the till in the 2015-2017 biennium, the Republican-controlled Senate and Democratic House are several hundred million dollars apart on their budgets. Improvements in mental health treatment (also court-compelled) are competing with education for the new money.

Agreement on a revenue figure may not get at the core of the Supreme Court's problem with education funding in Washington: the gap between the richest among the state's richest 295 school districts, and its poorest, and dependence on local levies that would be unnecessary, or smaller, if the state was doing its constitutional duty.

What may not be clear to Washington residents is the effect rebalancing state contribution toward basic education will have by creating winners and non-winners

among the districts. West Side districts that have more resources than districts east of the Cascade Divide in particular might feel pinched as local levies are capped.

Spokane School District officials are concerned there may not be enough new support for non-instructional staff, but for many Eastern Washington districts reform could be beneficial.

It may be too late to draft legislation that accomplishes everything that needs doing. The Legislature may have to pass a budget that pours an additional \$2 billion into K-12 education, and hope the Supreme Court will give it still more time to fix a system that penalizes students in poorer districts.

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